

Ludwig van Beethoven

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Born: December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria

Nationality: German

Occupation: Composer

The instrumental music of the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) forms a peak in the development of tonal music and is one of the crucial evolutionary developments in the history of music as a whole.

The early compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven marked the culmination of the 18th-century traditions for which Haydn and Mozart had established the great classical models, and his middle-period and late works developed so far beyond these traditions that they anticipated some of the major musical trends of the late 19th century. This is especially evident in his symphonies, string quartets, and piano sonatas.

In each of these three genres Beethoven began by mastering the existing formal and esthetic conventions of the late 18th century while joining to these conventions signs of unusual originality and power. In his middle period (from about 1803, the year of the *Eroica* Symphony, to about 1814, the year of his opera *Fidelio* in its revised form) he proceeded to develop methods of elaboration of musical ideas that required such enlargement and alteration in perception of formal design as to render it clear that the conventions associated with the genres inherited from the 18th century were for him the merest scaffolding for works of the highest individuality and cogency.

If Beethoven's contemporaries were able to follow him with admiration in his middle-period works, they were left far behind by the major compositions of his last years, especially the last three Piano Sonatas, Op. 109, 110, and 111; the *Missa solemnis*; the Ninth Symphony; and the last six String Quartets, Op. 127, 130, 131, 132, 133, and 135. These works required more than a generation after Beethoven's death to be received at all by concert audiences and were at first the preserve of a few perceptive musicians. Composers as different in viewpoint from one another as Brahms and Wagner took Beethoven equally as their major predecessor; Wagner indeed regarded his own music dramas as the legitimate continuation of the Beethoven tradition, which in his view had exhausted the possibilities of purely instrumental music. Beethoven's last works continue in the 20th century to pose the deepest challenges to musical perception.

Years in Bonn

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, the Rhineland seat of an electoral court. His ancestors were Flemish (the "van" was no indication of any claim to nobility but merely part of the name). His father, a tenor in the electoral musical establishment, harbored ambitions to create in his second son a prodigy like Mozart. As Beethoven developed, it became increasingly clear that to reach artistic maturity he would have to leave provincial Bonn for a major musical center. At the age of 12 he was a promising keyboard virtuoso and a talented pupil in composition of the court musician C. G. Neefe.

In 1783 Beethoven's first published work, a set of keyboard variations, appeared, and in the 1780s he produced the seeds of a number of later works. But he was already looking toward Vienna: in 1787 he

traveled there, apparently to seek out Mozart as a teacher, but was forced to return owing to his mother's illness. In 1790, when the eminent composer Joseph Haydn passed through Bonn, Beethoven was probably introduced to him as a potential pupil.

Years in Vienna

In 1792 Beethoven went to Vienna to study with Haydn, helped on his way by his friend Count Ferdinand von Waldstein, who wrote prophetically in the 22-year-old Beethoven's album that he was going to Vienna "to receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn." What he actually received from Haydn in lessons was little enough, and Beethoven turned to others of lesser talent in Vienna for help with counterpoint, including the contrapuntal theorist J. G. Albrechtsberger.

Beethoven rapidly proceeded to make his mark as a brilliant keyboard performer and improviser and as a gifted young composer with a number of works to his credit and powerful ambitions. He won entry into the musical circles of the Viennese titled upper classes and gained a number of lifelong friends and admirers among them. In 1795 his first mature published works appeared--the three Piano Trios, Op. 1--and his career was in effect officially launched. From then until the end of his life Beethoven was essentially able to publish his works at approximately the rate at which he could compose them, if he wished to; in consequence the opus numbers of his major works are, with a few trivial exceptions, the true chronological order of his output. No such publication opportunities had existed for Haydn or Mozart, and least of all for Schubert, who spent his entire life in Vienna (1797-1828) in Beethoven's shadow, from the publication standpoint.

From 1792 to his death in 1827 at the age of 57 Beethoven lived in Vienna, essentially as a private person, unmarried, amid a circle of friends, independent of any kind of official position or private service. He rarely traveled, apart from summers in the countryside. In 1796 he made a trip to northern Germany, perhaps to look over the possibilities for a post; his schedule included a visit to the Berlin court of King Frederick William of Prussia, an amateur cellist, and the Op. 5 Violoncello Sonatas appear to date from this trip. Later Beethoven made several trips to Budapest and to spas in Bohemia.

In 1808 Beethoven received an invitation to become music director at Kassel. This alarmed several of his wealthy Viennese friends into unprecedented generosity; three of them (Princes Lichnowsky and Kinsky and Archduke Rudolph) formed a group of backers and agreed to guarantee Beethoven an annual salary of 1,400 florins on condition that he remain in Vienna. He thus became, in principle, one of the first musicians in history to be freed from menial service and to be enabled potentially to live as an independent artist--although, as it happened, the uncertain state of the Austrian economy in the Napoleonic era caused a sharp devaluation of the currency, cutting the value of his annuity, and he also had some trouble collecting it.

Publishing Practices of the Time

Although publishers sought Beethoven out and he was an able manager of his own business affairs, as his letters show, he was really at the mercy of the chaotic and unscrupulous publishing practices of his time. Publishers paid a fee to composers for rights to their works, but neither copyright nor royalties were known. As each new work appeared, Beethoven sold it as dearly as he could to the best and most reliable current publisher (sometimes to more than one). But this initial payment was all he could expect, and both he and his publisher had to contend with piracy by rival publishers who brought out editions of their own.

Consequently, Beethoven witnessed a vast multiplication of his works in editions that were unauthorized, unchecked, and often unreliable in details. Even the principal editions were frequently no better, and several times during his life in Vienna, Beethoven hatched plans for a complete, authorized edition of his works. None of them materialized, and the wilderness of editions forms the historical background to the present problems of producing a truly scrupulous complete edition.

Personal Problems

Far overshadowing these general conditions were the two particular personal problems that beset Beethoven, especially in later life: his deafness and his obsessive relationship with his nephew Karl. Beethoven began to suffer from deafness during his early years in Vienna, and his condition gradually grew worse, despite remissions. So severe was the problem as early as 1802 that he actually seems to have contemplated suicide, as can be inferred from the so-called Heiligenstadt Testament, a private document written that year. It shows clear evidence of his deep conflict over his sense of artistic mission and his fear of inability to hear normally, to use the sense that should have been his most effective and reliable one. The turning points in his deafness actually came only later: first, about 1815, when he was compelled to give up all hope of performing publicly as a pianist (his Fifth Piano Concerto was written in 1809, an unfinished concerto in 1815); and after 1818, when he was no longer able to converse with visitors, who were thus forced to use writing pads to communicate (the famous "Conversation Books").

The second overriding problem (apart from his lifelong inability to form a lasting attachment to one woman, despite many liaisons) arose when he became the guardian of his nephew Karl on the death of his brother in 1815. Karl proved to be erratic and unstable, and he was a continuing source of anxiety to an already vulnerable man.

Beethoven's deafness and his undoubted tendency toward impetuosity and irascibility contributed to his reputation as a misanthropic and antisocial personality, one to be watched from afar and approached only with caution. As he retreated further into his work and as the works themselves became increasingly less comprehensible to his average contemporaries, the Vienna of light music and *Gemütlichkeit* saw him more and more as a kind of living embodiment of the artist beyond society. Later, as writers of the 19th century continued to cultivate this view of art, Beethoven became one of its mythical representatives, and his earlier biographers spread the image widely. Only by a careful reading of Beethoven's letters and the winnowing of reliable accounts from fanciful ones can one obtain a more balanced picture, in which one sees a powerful and self-conscious man, wholly engaged in his creative pursuits but alert to their practical side as well, and occasionally willing to conform to current demands (for example, the works written on commission, such as his cantata for the Congress of Vienna, 1814).

Beethoven's deafness was the major barrier to a continued career as the social lion of his early Vienna years, and it must inevitably have colored his personality deeply. But his complex development as an artist would probably in any event have sooner or later brought a crisis in his relationship to the surface of contemporary musical and social life. The trend was inward: in his early years he wrote as a virtuoso pianist-composer for an immediate and receptive public; in his second period he wrote for an ideal public; in his last years he wrote for himself.

It has long been commonplace in Beethoven biography to stress his awareness of contemporary political and philosophical thought, particularly his attachment to the libertarian ideals of the French Revolution and

his faith in the brotherhood of men as expressed in his lifelong ambition to compose a setting of Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy," realized at last in the Ninth Symphony. Frequently emphasized too is his undoubtedly genuine love of nature and outdoor life. But it is equally clear that no worthwhile estimate of Beethoven can be founded on a simple equation of these personal ideals with his music. In the Sixth Symphony (the *Pastoral*), Beethoven after great efforts found titles to suggest the allusions intended for each of the movements but sternly added in his sketchbook: "More the expression of feelings than tone painting." And in the Ninth Symphony he diligently sought the most effective way to introduce the vocal movement (the finale) with Schiller's words, at last hitting on the complex scheme of an introduction that reintroduces the thematic material of the earlier movements, rejects each in turn, and then opens the way to the finale through an explicit prefiguration of the theme to which the first stanza of the ode is to be set. In short, Beethoven's preoccupations from first to last were primarily those of musical structure and expression, and as more becomes known of his inner biography, as seen in his sketchbooks, a much more satisfactory portrait will be possible.

Brief Summary of Beethoven's Works

The general pattern of Beethoven's development as a composer is from a brilliant and prolific early manhood to the slow, painstaking efforts of his later years, in which his rate of production of new works dropped sharply in precise proportion as the works themselves became vastly more complex. The longest continuous thread in his development is that of his sketchbooks, which he used assiduously throughout his career and kept carefully, long after their contents had apparently been fully spent. This was not due to mere self-consciousness and an evident desire to keep close track of his own development; in this way he maintained a usable store of potential ideas and means of elaboration. Sometimes an idea from earlier years crops up in later work; in addition, Beethoven was strongly given to revision as well as elaboration, and at times he could not resist carrying out several modes of developing a single thematic idea. One example is the subject of the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony, which also appears as an orchestral dance and as the basis for a powerful set of piano variations, Op. 35. Other wholesale revisions of finished works include the three overtures to his opera *Leonore*, as well as the opera itself (first version 1805, second 1806), revised again and called *Fidelio* (1814) with still another overture.

First Period

The division of Beethoven's career into three phases originated with A. Schindler and W. von Lenz in the mid-19th century and forms a convenient means of reference. The first period, extending from his beginnings in Bonn to about 1802, shows a wide spectrum of compositions in virtually every genre of the time. The major works of this phase are the First and Second Symphonies, the first three Piano Concertos (written for his own performance and withheld from publication for some years), the first six String Quartets (Op. 18), much piano chamber music, and more than half of the 32 Piano Sonatas. The piano plays a conspicuous role in Beethoven's early work, reflecting his dual ambition as composer and performer, and as an instrument it was his major vehicle for technical experimentation. He was the first to exploit a number of pianistic effects, such as the pedal and the use of registral extremes, in a way that foreshadowed much in later piano music.

In Beethoven's early works one can distinguish two extremes: at one extreme are compositions that lean strongly toward a deliberate note of popular appeal; at the other extreme are the most serious and inwardly developed compositions. To the first group belongs, above all, the Septet for mixed string and wind instruments, easily his most popular early work, republished many times in various arrangements and written to emulate the facile 18th-century "serenade" or "divertimento." Typical of the second group are the

carefully wrought String Quarters of Op. 18, the first two Symphonies, and the most elaborate of the Piano Sonatas (for example, Op. 13, the *Pathétique*; Op. 27, Nos. 1 and 2; and the three Sonatas of Op. 31). Some of the chamber music leans to one extreme, some to the other; a work that leans to both is the Clarinet Trio, Op. 11, of which the first two movements are fully serious and the finale a light set of variations on a popular tune.

Many early Beethoven works employ the principle of formal structure associated with the classical variation technique. This emphasis in the early Beethoven is extremely significant; it relates to his talent for improvisation, suggests his sense of contact with popular music, and at the same time prefigures his later growth in the direction of the elaboration of inherently simple musical ideas. Throughout his career Beethoven never lost sight of the possibilities inherent in the variation form, of which the final expression in his work may be seen in the *Diabelli* Variations for Piano, Op. 120.

Second Period

The works of Beethoven's middle years form an extraordinary procession of major compositions, entirely departing from the traditional proportions and, to some extent, the methods of earlier tonal music. The earlier "facile" level of composition is abandoned, and occasional regressions to earlier types of movement structure are suppressed (for example, the substitution of a conventional slow movement by a tightly compressed slow introduction to the finale in the *Waldstein* Piano Sonata, Op. 53). Even the most superficial view of Beethoven's new scheme of musical design must include the following observations. He works now with the intensive elaboration of single ideas, to an extent never previously attempted in classical instrumental music (for example, the first movement of the Fifth Symphony). He extends the time scale of the three-or four-movement formal scheme to a high degree (for example, the *Eroica* Symphony, the unusual length of which was noted by the composer on his autograph manuscript). He replaces the old third movement of the symphony and the quartet (minuet or other medium-tempo dance form) with a dynamic and rapid movement, always called scherzo (this had already been done in early works). He brings about the dramatization of instrumental effects and musical components to an unprecedented degree, partly through the juxtaposition of strongly dissimilar musical ideas, partly through the ingenious use of means of establishing expectations of a particular kind and then either delaying them or turning in an unexpected direction (for example, the first movement of the *Appassionata* Sonata, Op. 57, in which no full resolution of a cadence on to the tonic is permitted until the end of the movement; the opening of the *Rasumovsky* Quartet, Op. 59, No. 3; and the dramatic use of silence, as in the opening of the *Coriolanus* Overture, Op. 62).

If Beethoven's second period of development is taken to run from approximately Op. 53 (the *Waldstein* Sonata) to Op. 97 (the *Archduke* Trio) or to *Fidelio*, it includes the Third through Eighth Symphonies; the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos; the Quartets of Op. 59, 74, and 95; the two last Violin Sonatas, Op. 47 (*Kreutzer*) and Op. 96; the Violoncello Sonata, Op. 69; the Piano Trios, Op. 70 and 97; the Piano Sonatas from Op. 53 to Op. 90; and the opera *Leonore* (*Fidelio*). He also wrote a large number of songs and a remarkable Mass in C Major, Op. 86.

The last works that can be associated with this phase of activity issue onto a period of cessation of continuous composition--a kind of twilight area that separates the second period from the last and reaches from about 1815 to perhaps 1818. It marks the onset of Beethoven's extreme deafness and of his difficulties with his nephew but also the preparation for musical tasks of unparalleled complexity in this

time.

Third Period

To attempt to characterize any truly significant aspects of Beethoven's last works in a few words would be beyond effrontery. The order of their composition is essentially the order of publication and thus of their opus numbers; and the great peaks of the last years are hedged in and about with a few smaller works tossed off to make money or to maintain the interest of avaricious publishers.

The procession of great monuments is essentially as follows: the last five Piano Sonatas (Op. 101, 106 called the *Hammerklavier*, 109, 110, and 111) written between 1815 and 1822; the *Missa solemnis* (1823); the Ninth Symphony (prefigured as early as 1815 and completed in 1824); and the last Quartets (from 1824 to 1826). Superficially obvious in these works is either vast expansion over the dimensions of even Beethoven's earlier works in the genre (for example, Ninth Symphony; the *Missa solemnis*; the *Hammerklavier* Sonata; and the Quartet, Op. 131) or extreme compression (for example, Op. 111, the last Piano Sonata, in two movements; and the Quartet, Op. 135). Obvious too is the renewed emphasis on fugal techniques, reflecting a lifelong desire to master the devices of tonal polyphony on a level to match that of Johann Sebastian Bach, whom Beethoven admired. The fugal movements include those in the Piano Sonatas, Op. 106 and 110; the *Missa solemnis*; the Ninth Symphony (parts of the scherzo and finale); and above all the *Grand Fugue*, Op. 133, originally designed as the finale for the Quartet, Op. 130, but then made a separate composition, with a new finale written for Op. 130.

The vastness and imaginative complexity of Beethoven's last works, especially the Quartets, baffled not only his contemporaries but later audiences and even professional musicians for some time after his death. In various ways they seem the fully logical outcome of a lifetime of deep exploration of the possibilities of tonal structure; in other ways they seem to exceed in depth almost any of Beethoven's other music and perhaps that of any other subsequent composer. That Beethoven himself was aware that they were beyond the capacities of the listeners of his time seems beyond doubt; that he expected later audiences to meet them with the requisite seriousness of interest and intent is, to judge from what is known of his character, a fair inference. An anecdote, perhaps apocryphal but entirely fitting, reports that Beethoven told a visitor who was bewildered by his last quartets, "They are not for you but for a later age."

Further Readings

- The largest published collection of Beethoven's letters is Emily Anderson, ed. and trans., *Letters* (3 vols., 1961). A valuable selection of letters is J. S. Shedlock, *Beethoven's Letters: A Critical Edition* (2 vols., 1909). An important volume of little-known letters was edited and translated by Donald W. MacArdle and Ludwig Misch, *New Beethoven Letters* (1957). A large number of Beethoven's "Conversation Books," the records of conversations between the composer and his associates and visitors during his last years, when his deafness had made normal discourse impossible, were in course of publication as of 1971 under the editorship of Karl-Heinz Köhler.
- The most important contributions to Beethoven biography were produced in 19th-century Germany. *Beethoven as I Knew Him* (1840; trans. 1966) was written by a friend, Anton Schindler; his personal knowledge partially atones for his limited objectivity. Lewis Lockwood's biography *Beethoven: The Music and the Life* (2002) is accompanied by a website containing music clips and analysis. The most authoritative biography is Alexander W. Thayer, *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven* (trans., 3 vols., 1921; rev. ed. by Elliot Forbes, 2 vols. 1964). See also Walter Riezler, *Beethoven* (1938). Full-length introductory studies of Beethoven's work include Sir George P. Grove, *The Symphonies of Beethoven* (1884; 3d ed. entitled *Beethoven and His Nine Symphonies*, 1962); Donald F. Tovey, *A Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas* (1931) and his *Beethoven* (1944); Eric Blom, *Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas Discussed* (1938); Joseph de Marliave, *Beethoven's Quartets* (trans. 1961); and Joseph

Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (1967). See also Paul Mies, *Beethoven's Sketches: An Analysis of His Style Based on a Study of His Sketch-Books* (1929).

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